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ABSTRACT

This study used Sedlacek's (1993) noncognitive variables of student success as a framework for describing student-athletes at a university. Sedlacek's variables include positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, ability to understand and deal with racism, emphasis of long-term over short-term needs, having a strong support person, successful leadership experience, community involvement, and knowledge acquired in a field. A total of 73 freshmen athletes at a large mid-Atlantic research university completed a 29-item questionnaire covering these variables. The study found that the student-athletes scored highest on realistic self-appraisal and leadership and lowest on long-term goals and the ability to understand and deal with racism. Three of the variables (successful leadership experience, community involvement, and knowledge acquired in a field) were found to be moderately correlated with grade point average. The results are discussed in regard to effective teaching and advising methods for use with this student population. (Contains 13 references.) (MDM)

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This study was done in cooperation with the Department of Intercollegiate Athletics and the Counseling Center. Computer time was provided by Academic Information Technology Services, all at the University of Maryland

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SUMMARY

Freshman athletes are conceptualized using a noncognitive framework. It is our contention that viewing college athletes with a "noncognitive lens" is a novel way of gaining information and making insights concerning this nontraditional student group. A sample of freshman athletes responded to the Noncognitive Questionnaire (NCQ) which yielded scores on 8 noncognitive variables.

Results indicated that 3 NCQ variables (leadership, community involvement, and nontraditional knowledge) were correlated with first semester grades of athletes. Furthermore, athletes scored highest on realistic self-appraisal and leadership dimensions of the NCQ. Suggested reasons for these findings include athletes are in an environment heavily involved in self-evaluation as well as multiple opportunities for leadership experience. Athletes scored lowest on preferring long-range goals to short-term needs and understanding and dealing with racism. Hypotheses offered for these results include that athletes are often encouraged to address immediate needs as opposed to focusing on long-range planning (e.g. take it one game at a time) and being stereotyped and experiencing prejudice.

These results were integrated with possible teaching/advising approaches that may be useful in working with this student population such as using athletes' self-evaluation skills as an asset in advising situations and teaching athletes how to deal effectively with a system that is not designed for them. This study provides evidence for the usefulness of noncognitive variables in working with college athletes. This is yet another perspective that advisors, faculty, and other college student affairs professionals can use in deciding how to best meet the needs of this nontraditional student population.

Working with diverse student groups is often a complex task given the great number of distinct student groups on college campuses. Westbrook and Sedlacek (1991) demonstrated the shift from using terms such as "culturally deprived" to "multicultural" and "diversity" to describe different student populations. Sedlacek (1993) goes further in defining students that have unique experiences when compared to the "typical" student population as nontraditional students.

Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) proposed that student-athletes can be conceptualized as a nontraditional student group. Clearly, student-athletes have different experiences from the "typical" student while sharing a common culture among themselves. This culture is characterized by shared values and philosophies created by being an athlete on campus. Thinking of college athletes as a nontraditional group is further supported by the finding that faculty and students tend to have negative stereotypes of student-athletes (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991). Results of this study indicate that students and faculty tend to think of student-athletes as a distinct group and have strong feelings concerning how they think this group acts. This discriminatory thinking based on group membership is similar to prejudice experienced by other non-traditional groups embedded in a dominant culture. Sedlacek (1996) asserted that for a group to be considered nontraditional it must experience prejudice and noncognitive variables should correlate with college success for the group. Noncognitive variables have been shown to predict

student grades as well as student retention for nontraditional groups (Sedlacek, 1996). Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) found that noncognitive variables are useful in predicting success for college athletes. Given these findings, college athletes seem to compose a specific segment of the college campus with distinct needs and goals and can be conceptualized as a nontraditional group.

Studying the unique aspects of college athletes seems important to being able to meet the diverse needs of the campus as a whole. College athletes are representatives of their school and they often influence public opinion concerning their institution. College athletes are often the subject of intense media scrutiny as well as a certain amount of scrutiny by administrators, faculty, and students by virtue of being associated with the athletic program (Attner, 1994; Telander, 1991). However, this attention does not often translate to objective inquiry regarding athletes. Researchers, educators, and student affairs professionals often have less experience relating nontraditional students' experiences/knowledge to success in college since this topic is often overlooked (Sedlacek, 1993).

The "student" is many times overlooked in the term student-athlete. Giving credence to athletes as students instead of being preoccupied with physical performance is key to helping them achieve their educational goals. The majority of college athletes, even the ones involved in revenue sports such as football and basketball at large schools, will never be

professional athletes. So how can we help student-athletes be more successful on the college campus given their unique needs and perspectives as nontraditional students ?

Sedlacek (1993) cited numerous studies that provide evidence for the usefulness of noncognitive variables in working with nontraditional student populations in terms of admission, retention, and graduation rates (Arbona & Novy, 1990; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984). Sedlacek, using Sternberg's (1985, 1986) 3 part definition of intelligence, noted that using noncognitive variables taps experiential and contextual intelligence which is important in working with and making decisions concerning nontraditional students. Nontraditional students often have less stable contexts in which they operate. Therefore, gaining a measure of one's ability to interpret information in a changing context (experiential intelligence) and understanding and operating within a system (contextual intelligence) can be useful in working with students who show their abilities in these ways.

Conceptualizing college athletes with a noncognitive framework can be a novel way of gaining information and making insights concerning this nontraditional student group. Sedlacek (1993) discussed the 8 noncognitive variables that can help explain why students are successful on a college campus. These noncognitive variables include: positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, understands and deals with racism, prefers long-range goals to short-term needs, availability of a strong support person, successful leadership experience, community involvement

and knowledge acquired in a field.

The purpose of the current study is to use Sedlacek's (1993) noncognitive variables as a framework for describing student-athletes. This requires a paradigm shift in terms of how we may think about college athletes. Identifying what makes them unique as athletes on campus and placing those characteristics in the context of a noncognitive model can aid the student affairs professional in meeting athletes' needs. By forming a "profile" of how college athletes score on noncognitive dimensions, more informed advising and teaching can be conducted with these students. A secondary purpose of the current study is to replicate Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston's (1992) findings that student grade point average (GPA) was not correlated with SAT scores but was strongly correlated with noncognitive variables for student athletes.

Method

Participants

The participants were 73 freshman athletes at a large mid-atlantic research university with an NCAA Division I-A athletic program. There were 51 males and 22 females in the sample, and the ethnicity composition was 23% African American, 3% Asian/Asian American, 68% White, 2% Hispanic, and 3% Biracial. The sample represented both revenue (e.g. football) and nonrevenue (e.g. tennis) sports. The study was done in cooperation with the university athletic department.

Instrumentation

The participants responded to the Noncognitive Questionnaire (NCQ) which provides a measure of noncognitive variables and consists of 29 items that are multiple choice, Likert type, or open-ended in nature. Open-ended items were rated and summed with the scores on the other items. (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984). Previous estimates of test-retest reliability range from .70 to .94 with a median of .85. Two independent raters rated the current data set and found an interrater reliability of .92.

Procedure

The participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the study and told they could withdraw their participation at any time. They were then asked to respond to the questionnaire and returned them to the researcher. No participants declined to participate in the study.

Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations of NCQ scores with first semester grades of the sample. These results are generally consistent with the findings of Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) in that the student-athletes scored highest on realistic self-appraisal and leadership and scored lowest on long-term goals and understanding racism. Three of the NCQ subscales (leadership experience, community involvement, and nontraditional knowledge) were found to be moderately correlated with GPA beyond the .05 level. As in the Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) study, the student-athletes in

the sample seemed similar to norm groups of Black students on the NCQ with all means in the "average" range (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984).

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations of SAT scores with GPA. The results of the current study are inconsistent with the previous findings that SAT scores were not found to be significantly correlated with first semester grades of student-athletes (Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston, 1992). This study found that SAT scores were moderately correlated with GPA beyond the .05 level.

Discussion

Using Noncognitive variables as a way of conceptualizing student-athletes' attitudes/experiences can be useful for educators, academic advisors, and student affairs professionals in working with this nontraditional student population. Scores on the NCQ are generally consistent with the findings of previous research concerning college athletes (Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston, 1992). Exploring hypotheses concerning the noncognitive dimensions where the student-athletes scored highest and lowest may deepen our understanding of this population and provide evidence for program planning, evaluation, and intervention Sedlacek, 1993).

Freshman athletes scored highest on both the realistic self-appraisal and leadership dimensions. The realistic self-appraisal dimension is characterized by the ability to recognize and accept deficiencies and works hard at self-development. In addition, it

involves a need to broaden individuality. One possible hypothesis for student-athletes scoring relatively high on realistic self-appraisal compared to other NCQ scores may be from their background in physical training/assessment. Perhaps student-athletes coming from a culture based on how to assess physical performance may translate assessment skills to other areas. Athletes have to constantly evaluate their physical performance while obtaining feedback on progress towards their goals. Using their assessment ability may aid them in realistically appraising strengths and weaknesses in working on self-development which may include academic performance and interpersonal skills.

This finding has implications for advising such students in that student-athletes may be open to constructive criticism more so than the "typical" student. This openness is a valuable strength in working with these students since improvement in any area cannot occur without being able to talk openly about deficits. In this way, whatever concern the student-athlete may bring can be assessed more openly and constructive action taken more quickly than with students with low realistic self-appraisal ability.

The student-athletes also scored highly on successful leadership experience. This dimension involves the having successes in engaging in meaningful leadership experiences pertinent to an individual's background. A possibility for this finding could be that student-athletes have more opportunities at being leaders in sporting activities. Leadership tendencies may

thus be fostered through the athletic environment of team/individual competition. Another alternative is that individuals with more outgoing leadership tendencies may be drawn to athletics in general which may set up student-athletes as being predisposed to excelling in leadership skills/abilities.

In either case, the college athletes were found to have definite strengths in leadership. These students may want to make a difference on their campus which is beneficial in terms of this type of outlook and commitment to their institution. However, this tendency can be taxing since these students often take on multiple roles for which they may not have time. Student-athletes may overcommit themselves in taking leadership roles on campus which is important to consider for the faculty and staff who work with this population.

The student-athletes scored lowest on preferring long-range goals to short-term needs. This noncognitive variable involves an individual's ability to defer gratification. A way to conceptualize the current findings in this dimension could be that student-athletes often deal with a variety of stressors and concerns that the typical student does not. For example, student-athletes must go to classes, do homework, and all the other expected activities of the role of student. Adding to that is the expectation of also being an athlete representing the institution and attending practices and participating in games. It is clear to see that many responsibilities compete for the student-athlete's attention and time.

Maslow (1954) asserts a Hierarchy of Needs that immediate needs in an individual's environment such as food and shelter will be addressed before "higher order" needs such as psychological well-being. From a hierarchy of needs framework, it makes sense that student-athletes may be more concerned with addressing more short-term needs (i.e. attending all weekly practices on time or winning the next game) as opposed to long-term goals (i.e. choosing a college major) given an environment filled with multiple demands. They may not have the experience in focusing on long-term needs such as career planning. In the athletic culture, athletes are encouraged to "focus on just the next game" or "take it one game at a time". Therefore, short-term thinking is reinforced while long-term planning is minimized or discouraged. When planning interventions and programs for student-athletes it may be important to include a justification for long-term goal planning and balancing long-term goals with addressing short-term needs. Also, providing student-athletes more support with satisfying short-term needs (such as time management or financial expenses) may aid student-athletes in being able to tackle long-term goals (such as career exploration).

The sample had low scores on understanding and dealing with racism. This dimension concerns a commitment to improving racist aspects of the existing system. This includes not being submissive to existing wrongs, not hostile to society and not withdrawing. This factor involves understanding the racist system

and operating effectively within the system while advocating for change.

Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) defined racism as negative outcomes that accrue to members of a certain group as a result of that membership apart from any other considerations. Group membership can be based on variables other than race and need not be chosen by the group member. Thus, athletes can experience racism according to this definition. Furthermore, college athletes do experience prejudice from faculty and other students (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991). As discussed previously, this group is a nontraditional student group with special needs and experiences that need to be respected. Part of these different experiences include experiencing prejudice. Often athletes are subjected to ambivalent opinions by faculty and students in that student-athletes are often admired on campus for their athletic talent and having the opportunity in representing the campus. However, this student group are also at times labeled as "dumb jocks"- inappropriately or blamed harshly for poor performance on the field. It seems evident that many faculty and students often have strong negative and strong positive opinions regarding student-athletes.

Sedlacek (1993) recommended that programs teaching student-athletes how to operate in a system not designed for them be implemented as well as programs to fight stereotyping of student-athletes. Indeed, system negotiation may be fruitful for working with student-athletes. Since our study indicates that the

student-athletes responded relatively low on this dimension, instructing these students on how to function effectively in the campus system while advocating assertively for changing existing discrepancies may prove invaluable.

The secondary purpose of the current study was to replicate the previous findings of Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) that noncognitive variables were more predictive of student-athletes' grades than SAT scores. The current findings partially contradict Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston's findings. Whereas SAT scores were previously only found to be weakly associated with GPA (and not significant at the .05 level), the current study found that SAT was moderately correlated with first semester grades (SAT Math $r=.43$ and SAT Verbal $r=.43$, $p<.05$). However, as in the previous study by Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992), noncognitive variables were found to be significantly correlated with GPA beyond the .05 level. These three variables were successful leadership experience, community involvement, and nontraditional knowledge acquired in a field. These variables are different for the most part from the noncognitive variables (self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, available support person, and community involvement) found by Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) as being associated with first semester grades. Perhaps what is less important is the specific noncognitive variables that were found to be correlated with grades as the fact that noncognitive variables as measured by the NCQ are correlated with grades and can be an alternative way of conceptualizing factors associated

with student success.

The current study's results were not as powerful as previous findings which pointed to the clear advantage of using the NCQ in predicting academic success of student-athletes as opposed to using SAT scores. However, the current study does provide more evidence for the usefulness of using the NCQ in being associated with first semester grades. Admissions personnel may want to consider noncognitive variables as measured by the NCQ in addition to the SAT in making admissions decisions particularly with student-athletes.

In summary, based on the current results a "profile" for student-athletes using a noncognitive framework may look something like the following. Student-athletes have several strengths which include an ability to engage in realistic self-appraisal and having successful leadership experiences. These students can honestly assess their weaknesses making the possibility of improvement increased. Drawing on leadership experiences can help student-athletes get involved on campus and potentially be agents of change. Student-athletes may tend to prefer addressing short-term needs than long-range goal planning. These students deal with multiple demands which may serve to distract and at times discourage. This population also seems somewhat lacking in understanding and handling racism. Student-athletes may need education on how to negotiate a system that is prejudiced and learning to identify and change discrepancies assertively.

It is important to note that the student-athletes in this study are freshmen and may not necessarily reflect attitudes of student-athletes in their second, third, or fourth years of school.

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Table 1

NCQ Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations with First Semester Grades

Variable	Mean*	SD	r with GPA
Self-Concept	51	10	-.01
Realistic Self Appraisal	60	10	.14
Understanding Racism	44	10	-.03
Long Range Goals	.42	10	.14
Support Person	51	10	-.04
Leadership	53	10	.31**
Community Involvement	45	10	.35**
Nontraditional Knowledge	50	10	.32**

*T Scores for NCQ means (Mean=50, SD=10) based on Black student norms in Tracey & Sedlacek (1984)

**Significant beyond .05

Table 2

SAT Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations with First Semester Grades

Variable	Mean	SD	r with GPA
SAT Math	522	80	.43**
SAT Verbal	534	81	.43**

**Significant beyond .05